



Impact and Influence – The Pygmalion in Leadership

LEADERSHIP COMPETENCY/ With the dwindling value of inspiration in the management world of short-lived leaders, one has to coach and explain the strategy in terms of what it means to an individual. The leadership impact and influence is stronger only when an appropriate leadership style is applied carefully analysing the situation and people involved, says M R CHANDRAMOWLY.

IN George Bernard Shaw's Pygmalion, Eliza Doolittle explains: "You see, really and truly, apart from the things any one can pick up (the dressing and the proper way of speaking, and so on), the difference between a lady and a flower girl is not how she behaves but how she's treated. I shall always be a flower girl to Professor Higgins because he always treats me as a flower girl and always will; but I know I can be a lady to you because you always treat me as a lady and always will."

Pygmalion was a sculptor in Greek mythology who carved a statue of a beautiful woman that subsequently was brought to life. Shaw's play has a similar theme, which was the basis for the musical hit, "My Fair Lady". The essence is that one person, by his effort and will, can transform another person. In the world of management, many leaders play Pygmalion like roles in developing able team members by influencing and stimulating their performance. But, some leaders like Professor Higgins, unintentionally fail to impact leading to lower performance.

Impact and influence is the ability to persuade, convince, negotiate with, and impress others. It is based on the desire to have a specific effect on others for achieving objectives. It is a specific type of impression to make, or a course of action or a direction that one wants the others to adapt to the benefit of organisation.

Influencing is an inside-out approach. It is controlling ourselves to gain mastery to impact on the external uncontrollable and achieving the magic of controlling that. It is managing the self to begin with and then to manage others.

Decreasing value of inspiration

Some people are very different and special. When you visit them, listen to them or talk to them you are charged with energy and enthusiasm. They kindle the fire in you which makes you carry a feeling of hope and confidence. Our past inspirational leaders like Gokhale, Gandhi, Netaji, Nehru and Lal Bahadur generated profound influence binding people together. That kind of influence and transformational magic flew out of genuine societal concern and selfless attitude.

"On the political front, presidents from Nixon to Clinton to Bush have made us distrustful of speeches, inspirational and otherwise. On the business front, many CEOs have sold or destroyed companies and walked away with golden parachutes. Employees do not respond to strong, powerful leadership the way they used to..." (David L Dotlich - Unnatural Leadership).

Though the classic lead and inspire style has its place, it faces the challenge of proving a non-dubious premise where cynicism has eroded confidence. People of today are much more responsive to leaders and they test and look behind the leadership influence to identify the "motive", before forming a trust. They look for inspiration and as much as explanation.

Pressure for performance, avalanche of information, rapid pace of change and other factors are demanding leaders to coach and guide people, some times holding hand and not just providing "inspiration" from the oval office.

Coach versus speech

As we see in many companies, majority of employees have a limited knowledge on what connects their day-to-day work to the mission and vision of their company.

While facilitating a leadership competency programme for the top level managers of an organisation, I was surprised to note more than 20 per cent of the managers could not understand what the company's mission and vision mean to them individually. It was an eye-opener for their leader and others.

I stopped teaching the part of the module and encouraged the leader and the team to write down five individual key accomplishments and rate them on two dimensions: Degree of importance to organisation's mission and vision and degree of individual performance level. Average group scores indicated the gap of over 25 per cent between what managers actually did and its alignment to their business strategy. Leadership influence lies in explaining the strategy in terms of what it means to individual. Coaching and teaching can do a far better job than an intranet notification or an employee communication speech.

Coaching is one style of leadership, which is appropriate when speech has no impact. Meaningful influence is achieved by application of a right leadership style fitting the need of the situation.

Styles - when appropriate?

The Boston consulting firm of McBer & Company (now the Hay Group) analysed an international sample database of 3,871 executives. The assessed leadership style as a behavioural predictor of organisational climate, based on the pioneering work of Litwin and Stringer, as refined by David McClelland and his colleagues at McBer.

"Analysis went one step further to look at how the climate that resulted from various leadership

styles affected financial results such as return on sales, revenue growth, efficiency, and profitability. Results showed that, all other things being equal, leaders who used styles with a positive emotional impact saw decidedly better financial returns than those who did not....The best leaders did not achieve greater results just by practicing one particular style but given a month or quarter, they would use most of the six distinct styles seamlessly and in different measures depending on the business situation. (Daniel Goleman - The New Leaders).

(1) A visionary leader moves people toward shared dreams. He impacts on a climate which require a new vision or when a clear direction is needed.

(2) Coaching Leader, connects what a person wants with the organisational needs and goals. This style is appropriate to help an employee improve performance by building long-term capabilities.

(3) An affiliative leader creates harmony by connecting people to each other. This style of leadership heals rifts in a team, motivate during stressful times or strengthen connections.

(4) A democratic leader, values people's inputs and gets commitment through participation. It is an appropriate style to build and buy-in consensus or to get valuable input from employees.

(5) Pacesetting leadership meets challenging and exciting goals to get high-quality results from a motivated and competent team. The style becomes negative if frequently and poorly executed.

(6) Commanding style soothes fears by giving clear directions in an emergency. Such a style is required to kick-start a turnaround or with problem employees. But the style has a limitation of becoming highly negative if frequently misused.

Influence in a work situation, is a two-way activity. Leaders do things on identifying the craving needs of individuals or situation, adopting an appropriate style, which creates an impact and magnetises people to move in a field force. A leader must be aware of what motivates individuals. According to research by Rewick and Lawler, the top motivators at work are (1) Job Challenge, (2) Accomplishing something worthwhile, (3) Learning new things, (4) Personal development, (5) Autonomy, Pay (12th), Friendliness (14th), Praise (15th) or Chance of Promotion (17th).

The leadership competency "Impact and Influence" can be developed and practiced. The basic rules are outlined in classic books like "People Skills" by Robert Bolton or "Thriving on Chaos" by Tom Peters. Influencing leaders note individual specific contributions and often tell people that what they do is important and offer help and ask for it. They provide autonomy in how people to do things. They surprise people with enriching and challenging assignments showing deep interest in career progression of people. Some leaders energise people wherever they go. But, other leaders energise people whenever they go!

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